



The team at Gowrie, Victoria

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Dedication:

This profile is dedicated to Jodie Knox, who sadly passed away just days before the interview for this profile was recorded. We have done our very best to include Jodie's perspectives and contribution to the project and trust that she knows what a lasting impact her contribution to EC will have.

This is a profile of a practitioner team who in late 2015 led a change process to take on the management of an existing 128-place EC setting in Broadmeadows, Victoria, that is co-located with Broadmeadows Valley Primary School. The team at Gowrie Victoria, led by CEO Andrew Hume, took on the service as part of their strategic direction to demonstrate high quality provision in contexts that were different from those we had previously operated in. We were keen to share our learning experience with others in the sector. Gowrie's two existing services were located in relatively high socio-economic communities in close proximity of the CBD. Broadmeadows was a very different community. This experience of change highlights the significance of the context of each community—an important factor in any change process. Along with Jodie Knox, Manager, Early Learning, and Michelle Gujer, Manager, Children's Programs, Broadmeadows Valley, the team took on the operations of the service in an eight-week period (over the year-end holidays)—from signing the contract to opening the doors for the children. Their story is one of intense teamwork, change and rapid learning. Michelle says, 'We knew that we could not just replicate what was happening in our other services. This needed to be unique and we needed to learn about this community and how we would fit.'

Andrew shared that when the opportunity to take on the operations of the Broadmeadows site came up, everyone in the organisation, including the Board, was enthusiastic and could see that it was a good fit with Gowrie's strategic direction. The strategy, partner selection and site selection criteria had all been pre-agreed with the Board, which helped tremendously with the pace of decision-making. The site gave them the opportunity to 'Champion Good EC' (their purpose) by demonstrating high quality practice in a complex community at a reasonable price; and to make transition to school invisible by working in partnership with the school and families.

Of course, nothing is ever simple and they needed to look beyond the idealised dream to the pragmatics and viability. Before anything else, the school and Gowrie Victoria needed to assure each other that they were aligned in terms of aspirations, values and learning philosophies. They each spent a day in each other's services to assess the quality of each other's practice, to meet team members and to see the philosophies in action. It was essential that this was a high quality and sustainable service if Gowrie was going to put its name to it. Passion about the project was

necessary, but it took a lot of business and implementation planning, negotiating and willingness to take on considerable risk by both Gowrie and the school to make it a reality. Team members brought different skills to this—they each have respect for what each other brings. It has been important to realise that they don't all have to be experts at everything. Andrew says, 'If we trust each other and are clear on what we are trying to achieve we can draw on each other's strengths and leave each person to get on with what they are good at'.

Michelle says she came on board when Jodie asked her to move from her position as Manager, Children's Programs at Gowrie Docklands. 'I had made similar moves earlier in my career. Leaving a centre I loved and had put a lot of energy into to move to the great unknown. Did I really want to move on and take on something new? Absolutely!' Michelle had worked in this community before and had good relationships with many key people in the community. 'I know of the importance of relationships and that is what makes all of this possible.'

Jodie also had an unrelenting enthusiasm and energy for this project. They really needed each other, because there were some very tough times and at times it was difficult to see how they could realise this vision. In times of big change they needed high levels of support and understanding. They realised how important it was for the organisation to have a can-do attitude and many people from across the organisation had a role to play, even if that was just carrying a greater load in the other services while people were pulled into the Broadmeadows work. Michelle says, 'We never underestimated how much we had to rely on each other. We worked really hard—really long hours, but we all really wanted it! It was bigger than all of us, but together we were determined to give it our all'.

It was a very systematic change. Jodie led the implementation. In the early weeks, the team met every week. Jodie had the experience and a clear vision for what would be needed to make this smooth. Michelle says, 'Jodie's knowledge and willingness to listen to what I was asking for was so valuable. I didn't feel like I had to relentlessly advocate—she trusted me. Jodie was very solution focused—she didn't get bogged down by what was not possible but had a real "let's fix it and move on" approach. Her positivity was a real driver for us all'.

Probably one of the best decisions they made was around recruitment. They deliberately looked for a combination of educators from the service: both existing Gowrie educators and educators from the sector more generally. This was designed to have both content and context expertise and to make sure that the Gowrie experience from other contexts did not dominate. In all, they were looking at recruiting 16 new people in about three weeks. They invited applicants to a group interview and information day. This worked really well because it gave them the opportunity to be really clear about their expectations and carefully select teams that they felt would work well together. They recruited based on values and expertise and the group setting was useful to see how people's values played out. This proved a very successful strategy as they have had very little turnover of staff since the centre opened.

The melding of familiar and unfamiliar educators was also a successful strategy. While they wanted the foundations to be the purpose and values of Gowrie Victoria, they also needed to listen and learn about this context. The varied backgrounds of staff, while always a challenge, helped them to achieve this. Throughout this change process they learnt that the 'Gowrie Way' is not one way. Their approach is certainly built on common values, but the programs look very different at each Gowrie centre. For us, change was not about just replicating what they were already comfortable with.

Michelle feels strongly that one of the keys to successful change management is empowering leaders to lead. 'I drive the communication through the room leaders. We were forced to talk with each other because a lot of systems were still being put in place. We set up regular meeting times fortnightly with room leaders and one-on-one meetings in between. Lots of daily catch up and just an open door to

keep talking policy. I know the staff well, but I leave room for leaders to deal with the day-to-day issues that arise and provide support where needed.

'I also feel that another key driver to building an effective team is to build a culture of trust, honesty and being part of a learning community where an organisation views mistakes as learning opportunities and this being genuinely practised at every level. It is tempting to micro-manage in times of significant change, but I have had to learn over the years to let go of my fear of making mistakes. I base my leadership on what I have experienced both good and bad and the way I want to be treated, listened to and consulted. We have to empower people to be decision-makers because the task is too big for one person'.

One of the great learnings from this process has been that change takes a long time. They have to regularly check in and recall what it was like a year ago—how far they have come. Andrew says, 'While starting the service was an intense piece of work, we were always acutely aware that this opportunity provided the potential to make a contribution to the community in Broadmeadows. Good work takes time and requires the collective efforts of children, families, community and service providers. It is pleasing a year on to see the huge progress that the children have made and to watch the first group of children moving through to the school. Because of the shared values and vision between the centre and the school, these children already have established relationships, are familiar with the rooms and will find a curriculum including a play-based approach'.

The constant presence and the pervasiveness of the impacts of change are universal characteristics of EC settings. Some indicators of these changes are easily visible, especially when observing children's growth and development during their early years. Visible indicators, such as those related to how the play areas are organised, may not be changed every day or may be reorganised monthly. The nature of how the staff roster is organised, if managed well, and how staff come and go before and after their shifts, may appear seamless, thereby creating a sense of security for both children and their parents. Not every change can be intentionally led and planned with particular aims and goals defined in order to complete a project for instance. Some changes emerge suddenly, without any prior notice, and others could have been predicted but the signs could be ignored or dismissed as an impossibility.